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Australia PM says new terror laws will not invade privacy

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SYDNEY - Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott on Wednesday defended tough new terror laws under which digital data will be retained for up to two years, denying it is an invasion of privacy.

Prime Minister Tony Abbott (C) speaks at a joint press conference with Foreign Minister Julie Bishop and Attorney General George Brandis (R) in Canberra, on August 5, 2014

The government plans to overhaul laws to make it easier to arrest and prosecute terrorists and make it an offence to travel to designated hotspots overseas without a valid reason.

It has also substantially increased resources to security and intelligence agencies and wants telecommunications companies to retain metadata for up to two years.

"They're not invading privacy," Abbott told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation of the proposed laws which were announced Tuesday.

"The metadata that we're talking about is information which is already kept. And all we're saying is that the telecommunications providers should continue to keep this.

"We're not asking anyone to do what they don't already do," he added. "We're simply asking that they continue to do it as technology changes, because this is an important weapon in the fight against crime more generally."

His office later clarified that Internet browsing information would not be retained, saying metadata did not include this. Capturing this data would still require a warrant, the prime minister's office said.

Abbott said he had no doubt that the "civil libertarian brigade" would do their best to stop the laws, but said it was his responsibility to keep the nation safe.

"And all of the expert advice from every single counter-terrorist agency is that this information is absolutely essential if we are to maintain our vigilance against terrorist activity," he said.

Abbott said an instructive metaphor was to think of metadata as the information written on the front of an envelope -- the recipient, address, sender and the time and place it was sent from -- not its contents.

- 'A scheme of mass surveillance' -

The data would include such things as telephone numbers, the time and length of phone calls, where the calls were made from, email addresses, and the Internet protocol addresses of computers from which messages are received or sent, his office said.

But Civil Liberties Australia director Tim Vines said Internet providers currently collected billing and subscriber information, but had no incentive to retain other data long term.

He said government agencies already had extensive powers to request metadata and warrants to intercept communications between people of interest to authorities.

"Why do we need a scheme of mass surveillance?" he asked.

Jon Lawrence from digital rights group Electronic Frontiers Australia also criticised the planned laws, saying they were "completely unnecessary and a wholesale invasion of privacy".

He said they would create "massive honeypots" of valuable data vulnerable to being exploited by rogue employees, hackers or others.

"The number of ways that this information could be compromised is enormous and probably the only thing that would be certain in that context is that that information would be compromised at some point in some way," he said.

"Because really the only secure data is data that doesn't exist."

Katina Michael, vice-chair of the Australian Privacy Foundation, a privacy rights organisation, said the mass collection of data left people's private information vulnerable to being accessed by hackers or others.

"We are very opposed to any metadata being retained by the government," she told AFP. "What's that going to solve, save for additional surveillance powers?"

About the author

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